

*Jesús Blanco Hidalga, Jonathan Franzen and the
Romance of Community: Narratives of Salvation*

Thomas Mantzaris



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/14814>
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Thomas Mantzaris, « Jesús Blanco Hidalga, Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community:
Narratives of Salvation », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2019-3, Online since 23
October 2019, connection on 31 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/14814>

This text was automatically generated on 31 October 2019.

Creative Commons License

Jesús Blanco Hidalga, Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community: Narratives of Salvation

Thomas Mantzaris

¹ Jesús Blanco Hidalga, *Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community: Narratives of Salvation*

² Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. 251. ISBN: 9781501319839

³ Thomas Mantzaris

⁴ Jesús Blanco Hidalga contributes to the critical scholarship on Jonathan Franzen's work by proposing the concepts of salvation and redemption. Examining Franzen's fiction with this theoretical lens, Blanco Hidalga suggests a metanarrative quality that relates the characters in the novels to the author himself. By integrating "usually separated formal and ideological perspectives" (ix), *Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community: Narratives of Salvation* departs from established scholarly criticism, offering a fresh interpretive reading against which Franzen's work can be approached and reconsidered.

⁵ The structure of the volume mirrors the foundation, development, and boundaries of Blanco Hidalga's main argument as well as exemplifies the study's critical potential to shed light on Franzen's work. From *Strong Motion* to *Freedom*, Franzen's novels are viewed by Blanco Hidalga as "salvational narratives which indirectly support and legitimize Franzen's formal and political evolution" (3). Hence, the four novels are examined in distinct chapters that convincingly ground and advance the argumentation, while Franzen's most recent novel, *Purity*, becomes indicative of the (restored) confidence of the author to "explore new narrative territories" (215). The body of Franzen's five novels therefore constitutes the field in which Blanco Hidalga demonstrates how the critical concepts of salvation and redemption not only cast light on Franzen's fiction, but also inform the development of the American author.

6 In the introduction, the author develops the critical framework within which Franzen's novels will be examined. Blanco Hidalga draws upon Fredric Jameson and Franco Moretti, and combines them with Franzen's essays "Perchance to Dream" and "Mr. Difficult" in order to determine how the author ideologically rejects postmodernist practices and formally embraces realism, while bringing into his novels "ingredients" (24) from the genres of romance, melodrama, and Bildungsroman. The depression and despair that Franzen experiences in the beginning of his career are redeemed by his communication with Don DeLillo and Shirley Brice Heath who "perform an essential role in Franzen's own salvational narrative" (4): it is through their mediation, Blanco Hidalga argues, that "Franzen regains his faith in the novel and starts writing fiction that emanates from his *true self*, achieving therefore literary and personal salvation" (4; emphasis in original). The introduction also establishes fundamental threads that permeate Franzen's novels: the social orientation of fiction, the narrow perspective that Franzen employs in his representations, and the notion that despite the characters' retreat from the public sphere to the communities of family and lovers, "salvation can only be individual" (13).

7 The exploration of Franzen's fiction begins with *The Twenty-Seventh City*, a novel that highlights the decay of the once thriving American cities, exemplified by St Louis. As Blanco Hidalga acutely observes, "at the heart of these two parallel concerns — the sociopolitical and the domestic — lies a deep yearning for a lost sense of community" (40). The scholar argues that Franzen "consciously striv[es] to attain historicity" to counterbalance the absence of historical thinking, as Jameson contends in *Postmodernism* (ix), by placing the city "as a focal point of history" (Debord, *Society* 118, emphasis in original). Marked by absence and eventlessness, garbage and stagnation, the representation of St Louis reveals Franzen's ideological criticism of the processes of capitalist modernity. Drawing upon the theoretical work of Kevin Lynch and Italo Calvino, Blanco Hidalga describes St Louis as a "fantôme city" (48; emphasis in original). The absence of individual salvational narratives enhances the despair and isolation that the novel's characters experience, while it justifies the role of *The Twenty-Seventh City* in "set[ting] the departing ground" (40) for Blanco Hidalga's main thesis. The environmental concerns of the novel coupled with discussions on social class, consumerism, and conspiracy, pave the path for the examination of Franzen's subsequent novels. At the same time, Blanco Hidalga draws on these themes to establish Franzen's affinities to contemporary postmodernist authors.

8 Turning his attention to Franzen's largely neglected *Strong Motion*, Blanco Hidalga underscores the significance of this novel in providing "the blueprint of an authorial rhetorical device of legitimization" (82) that develops further in *The Corrections* and reaches closure in *Freedom*, a metanarrative that the scholar names "the narrative of conversion" (82). In this chapter, the thematic concerns of the novel are viewed in light of their presence across Franzen's fiction, suggesting a continuity in the perspective that Franzen employs in order to explore the effects of advanced modernity on the environment, the frustration with the failings of activism to prove politically effective, and the despair at corrupt social structures. Blanco Hidalga draws upon Sigmund Freud and Judith Butler in order to trace the behavior of the adult characters in *Strong Motion* to "a background of neglected infantile needs" (86) that hinders their ability to establish successful love and sexual relationships as "the Other [becomes] a potential site of enslavement and engulfment for the subject" (89). Blanco Hidalga identifies

Franzen's "conflicted nostalgia for the industrial age" (98) and leads the discussion towards the toxicity and risk that permeate the modernized urban environment and are symptomatic of the workings of capitalism. The characters' inability to bring about progressive social change due to the intractability of the system, together with the ambivalent representation of the suburbs as sites of heterotopia, leads them to "retreat from the political and the social" (112). The possibility of salvation then is sought (and attained) in the community of lovers, and it is precisely this strategy that relieves the tension between Franzen's commitment to Systems novels (exemplified best by Pynchon's *Gravity Rainbow*) and his intention to adhere to a realist representation of reality.

- 9 Blanco Hidalga approaches *The Corrections* as a "complex amalgam" (121) of postmodernist motifs and sociocultural criticism that conventionally alludes to realism. According to the scholar, what accounts for the formal complexity of the novel is the decade-long writing process that, together with Franzen's personal crisis, has led to the author's "change of literary direction" (122). For Blanco Hidalga, what differentiates *The Corrections* from the body of American fiction that has portrayed the world system as "an essentially unknowable entity" (129), is Franzen's attempt to demystify the workings of late capitalism via exposing its ideological foundations. Blanco Hidalga is right to claim that Franzen's insistence on representing white middle-class characters that metonymically signify larger social problems functions only to undermine them, in the same way that the fortification of suburbia signifies the dissolution of the wider community and the enhancement of the class division in the novel. The possibility for social transformation is "explicitly dismissed from the outset" (163) in *The Corrections*, and the social conflicts and contradictions shift from the public space of the city to the private space of house, where the characters seek personal salvation.
- 10 The metanarrative in Franzen's fiction culminates in *Freedom*, before the American author embarks on the exploration of other territories. In this novel, the disintegration of the urban setting is replaced by the possibility for regeneration; instead of a population displacement towards the suburbs and an "elegy for infrastructure" (149), Blanco Hidalga observes the "reknitting of social fabric by the new dwellers in the district" (169) and a vested interest in environmentalism. Though Franzen remains faithful to his pattern of representative characters, it is "art and consumption [that] legitimiz[e] social differences" (175). The scholar illuminates the landscape of *Freedom* by revealing the intricate connections between the ideological vulnerability of social classes and the culture wars in America, the restoration of faith in social activism, and the writer's belief in the family as a viable social system. The happy ending of the novel suggests that Franzen's narrative of conversion has reached a form of closure.
- 11 Blanco Hidalga concludes his study on Franzen's fiction by showing how the author of *Purity* departs from earlier formal, ideological, and thematic concerns. While not entirely abandoning the concepts of salvation and redemption, in *Purity* Franzen has successfully combined (subtle) social commentary with elements from the gothic tradition. The sharp criticism of the Internet and social media is mitigated, according to the scholar, by Franzen's decision to "elegantly opt for *deferred* hope in a less conclusive ending" (235; emphasis in original). Featuring consistent combination of critical rigor with theoretical insight, Blanco Hidalga's study eloquently introduces the concepts of salvation and redemption that reverberate across Franzen's novels. Therefore, *Jonathan Franzen and the Romance of Community: Narratives of Salvation* emerges

as an essential study for scholars of Jonathan Franzen and of contemporary American fiction in general.

12 **Bibliography**

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Soul Bay P, 2009.

Franzen, Jonathan. *Freedom*. Fourth Estate, 2010.

---. "Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of How-to-Read Books." *The New Yorker*, Sep. 30, 2002, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/09/30/mr-difficult.

---. "Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels." *Harper's Magazine*, Apr. 1996, pp. 35-54.

---. *Purity*. Fourth Estate, 2015.

---. *Strong Motion*. Picador, 2007.

---. *The Corrections*. Picador, 2010.

---. *The Twenty-Seventh City*. Noonday, 2010.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Verso, 1991.

AUTHOR

THOMAS MANTZARIS

Thomas Mantzaris, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece